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TAGS: [SCUL](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: "MA FEE SHABAB": SYRIAN YOUNG MEN FRUSTRATED BY
LACK OF ACCESS TO SOME SOCIAL VENUES

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter For Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

1.(C) SUMMARY: As one of Damascus' most popular malls began enforcement on January 28 of a new rule barring young men from entering on weekend evenings after 7:00 p.m., Damascus youth complained about what they claimed was the increasing use of "ma fee shabab" (no "guys" or "young men") edicts at the city's social venues. The rules, which have long been common in more conservative Arab societies such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, are not new to Syria. But according to our contacts they are being used more frequently here, not to impose conservative social values, but to crack down on juvenile delinquency among Syria's increasingly youthful population. END SUMMARY.

"FAMILIES ONLY"

12. (C) The Cham Centre Mall, one of Damascus' newest malls and most popular weekend hangouts for young people, began barring young men from entering the mall without their families on Thursday and Friday evenings after 7:00 p.m. starting in late January. Abdul Ghani Attar, the 31-year-old businessman who runs the adjacent Damascino Mall, confirmed to us on January 31 the Cham Centre Mall began the new policy to crack down on "hooliganism" among young men who frequent the mall and sometimes engage in fights and harass women.

13. (SBU) Reaction from Damascus University students who hang out at the mall was swift. "Of course they pick the only hours of the week we like to go there; they are just trying to take the fun things away from life," one young man said. Another man who works at a cafe in the mall said there had been "problems" in recent weeks at the mall with young men harassing women. "But that doesn't mean you blame every guy in Damascus," he declared. An employee of the mall's gym warned that if problems with young men at the mall persist, the hours young men are barred from the complex may be extended.

14. (C) The new rule was seemingly not only applied to teenagers and college students, but to older single men as well. Emboff was barred from entering on January 28, and was not allowed to enter until he spoke English and explained he was American. The guard said he was under instructions not to apply the rule to "Western tourists." Indeed, while most of the mall's signs are in Arabic and English, the sign announcing the new rule was only in Arabic. It warned both young men and young women from entering the mall at the specified hours, but mall workers reported the rule was being enforced only against young men.

SYRIA'S INCREASINGLY YOUNG POPULATION LOOKS FOR SOCIAL OUTLETS

15. (SBU) Similar rules are being used by other social venues frequented by families and women, like cafes. Young men often complain the rules encourage misbehavior among Syria's youth, who end up roaming the streets with nothing to do. Syrians under the age of 19 now make up over 50% of the

population, and 57% of young Syrians under the age of 25 are unemployed. Syrian young people describe a need for more social and recreational venues to pass the time.

¶16. (C) A group of Damascus University students recently criticized what they said was the increasing segregation of single men at popular Damascus cafes. The criticism came after a group of students accompanied by Emboff was told by a string of cafes they were attempting to enter that they must sit in a separate room reserved for "shabab." "Welcome to Damascus, Saudi Arabia," one young man said, referring to the common Saudi practice of restricting single men unaccompanied by their families to separate seating areas at public venues.

¶17. (SBU) The students related that while the phenomenon of segregating "shabab" was not new, they believed the practice was becoming more common. "They are saying that single guys cause problems, which is true, but it's still not fair," one student said. The students also complained the practice is not applied to Western young men. "Look at those American guys over there. They are not occupying our land here, they are occupying our girls," a journalism student declared. When a waiter at one cafe told the young men they could not sit in the main seating area because women were seated there, a student responded, "The reason we are here is to meet women. We are leaving."

¶18. (C) Our contacts stress that the "ma fee shabab" edicts are not being used in Syria to impose conservative social values as in the Gulf states, but to prevent misbehavior. While stating he was not privy to the details of the case, Attar said the Cham Centre Mall finally decided to take

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action after a young girl who was "lost" in the mall was harassed. Attar added that not all Syrian business owners support the Cham Centre Mall's new measures. He said he does not plan on introducing a similar rule at his mall for the moment. "At the Damascino Mall, we have a different mindset. You should come hang out here," he concluded.

HUNTER